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ABSTRACT

Fear of success in women is a pervasive phenomenon affecting women's career development. Women affected by this phenomenon are often unaware that they are afraid of succeeding. Identification of the factors that contribute to the fear of success in women's career development is important for educators and counselors wanting to assist women in their professional goals. The factors that are associated with fear of success in women fall into these categories: familial socialization, psychological influences, and cultural norms. Familial socialization can be thought of as a developmental process in which the individual learns the expected behavioral traditions of a family. Psychological influences are those personal factors that tend to sway the person's thinking. The third factor which influences a woman's fear of success is attributed to cultural norms, in which women are taught that men have authority to manage the family's place in the external world. It is generally conceded that any one or combination of these factors can precipitate a fear of success which becomes manifest in the woman's defeatist behaviors and in turn, undermines her career development. It is imperative that professionals recognize the factors causing the fear of success orientation in women so that they may develop coping strategies with the client. (Author/ABL)

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FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO THE FEAR OF SUCCESS IN WOMEN'S CAREER DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

Identification of the factors that contribute to the fear of success in women's career development is important for educators and counselors wanting to assist women in their professional goals. In this article the factors that are associated with fear of success in women are categorized as follows: familial socialization, psychological influences and cultural norms. It is generally conceded that any one or combination of these factors can precipitate a fear of success which becomes manifest in the woman's defeatist behaviors and in turn, undermines her career development. It is imperative that professionals recognize the factors causing the fear of success orientation in women so that they may develop coping strategies with the client.

Horner (1968) introduced the concept fear of success, to better explain why many women accomplish less than their full potential. Women have a "disposition to become anxious about achieving success because they expect negative consequences (such as social rejection and/or feeling of being unfeminine) as a result of succeeding" (Horner, 1972, p. 159).

Fear of success in women is a pervasive phenomenon affecting women's career development. Many women ascend almost to the top in corporations and for some seemingly unexplained reason exhibit defeatist behaviors that bar their further ascent. Women affected by this phenomenon are, many times, unaware that they are afraid of succeeding. This subconscious process may result in a gradual decrease in proficiency and may prove detrimental to career development. With more and more women entering the work force and choosing to pursue a career--not just a job--it is important for professionals to recognize the existing problems and understand the factors which contribute to a fear of success. Once professionals ascertain factors that contribute to a fear of success they will be better able to develop strategies to assist women in coping with the pressures and enjoy the rewards of success.

FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO THE FEAR OF SUCCESS

The factors contributing to the fear of success in women can be categorized as follows: familial socialization, psychological influences, and cultural norms. These factors interact with one another throughout an individual's life and any one or

combination can precipitate behavior that undermines success. Ultimately, familial socialization, psychological influences, and cultural norms can produce in women, a phenomenon referred to as the fear of success unless they are prepared with coping strategies.

FAMILIAL SOCIALIZATION

Familial socialization can be thought of as a developmental process in which the individual learns the expected behavioral traditions of a family. Interactive factors of familial socialization can be from past experiences or from present situations which influence the individual's behavior and in turn produce social consequences. Socialization very often produces responses set among women which provide options only in traditional roles and occupations (Fitzgerald and Crites, 1980).

An example of a past familial socialization is the parent-daughter relationship. If the girl's parents' have been more supportive, more nurturing and more sharing than most parent-daughter relationships, the daughter tends to be more achievement-oriented (Paludi, Fankill-Hauser, 1986). Sharing included not only the parent's interest but actual participation in the daughter's activities and endeavors. Parents of achievement-oriented females treat both sons and daughters alike in respect to their ability and value. They also encourage freedom of expression during development according to individual interests and inclination. Also, these parents are more likely

to provide opportunities to increase knowledge in nontraditionally feminine areas (Hirschfeld, 1982). However, achievement orientation can be undermined if the parent does not value the daughter both for femaleness and successful achievement. If the career woman feels she is going against her gender-role by being "unfeminine", she may develop fear of success behaviors during her career development and sabotage her future career endeavors (Illfelder, 1980).

Fear of success can develop in females even in families that value achievement. High standards of achievement are valued in the familial structure, yet girls can be discouraged if they are too competitive. Parents encourage and reward affiliative and cooperative behavior over competitive behavior. For example, boys are socialized to be competitive, aggressive and achievement oriented in their careers. But girls are socialized to be noncompetitive, nurtured, and passive in their behavior (Gupta, 1983). Therefore, these same women retreat from competitive situations for fear they will be resented and ostracized. Tresemier (1977) says that females with fear of success consistently show more cooperative behavior than do achievement-oriented females who are not afraid of success. These women are afraid to compete in the career world and therefore, stabilize in a pattern of passive, noncompetitive mutual cooperation (Gupta, 1983).

A similar kind of familial socialization is one in which the parents discourage their daughters from exhibiting any overt pleasure from winning. Parents may reinforce the belief that

socially pleasing females are modest and self-effacing by encouraging achievement-oriented girls to exhibit an attitude of humility and gratitude to others for helping them. This compliant attitude in females is also reinforced by the view of many that competitiveness in males is desireable, and yet the same competitive behavior in females is viewed as aggressive. Messages that are conveyed to women are often contradictory and ambiguous (Hirschfeld, 1982). Success in women, then, is frequently associated with aggression and the female is hesitant to be overtly competitive.

Another kind of familial socialization encourages girls to view siblings and even parents as rivals to be overcome. Competition is highly valued and the girl feels as if she must demonstrate her worth. She is afraid, however, any real victory may cause the withdrawal of family love and support. Consequently, this ambivalent attitude toward success can be seen through life. As adults these women initially make an all-out effort to attain the top goal, or number one position, and beat their "rivals". However, they are afraid that in doing so, they will lose support from spouse, family and friends, so, for some inexplicable reason, these women avoid taking the final step and withdraw; hence, a manifestation of fear of success behavior.

It is clear that children learn much of their behavior from watching others. The child's imitation is motivated partly by the power of authority figures, therefore, the child is likely to imitate parents or other adults. Behaving like a particular individual gives a child the sense that she may possess other

individual's power. An observation is that children tend to imitate the same-gender parent, therefore, a girl imitates her mother and other women more often than men. This has a great effect on women's career development since in the past women have usually occupied the niche of homemaker, mother, and housekeeper (Lauver, Gastellum, and Sheehey, 1975). Although two-thirds of all mothers work outside the home, this was not always so. For those career women in their thirties, forties and fifties, the probability of having a mother who worked outside the home was extremely rare. Therefore, very few women serve as models in occupational areas, management and the skilled trades (Hackett, Betz, 1981). For girls, there is a lack of same-sex models in career occupations.

An unsupportive spouse or significant other can also foster the motive of fear of success. The attitude of a spouse has great impact on a woman's attempts to achieve success. For instance, the nonsupportive spouse may recognize his wife's talent, but will not encourage it. He may incessantly irritate her about the new title or the new degree she has obtained, and yet, maintains that he is proud of her. He may even encourage her and yet insist that she continue with the major domestic responsibilities. This ambiguous behavior can significantly hinder career achievement. These women feel threatened at home and are constantly worrying about their partners feeling intimidated to their successes (Paludi, Fankell-Hauser, 1982).

with a nonsupportive spouse and family, it is difficult for a career woman to display confidence and a fear-of-success attitude can become overwhelming.

PSYCHOLOGICAL INFLUENCES

Psychological influences are those personal factors that tend to sway the person's thinking. Attitudes and beliefs are examples of psychological influences. Women tend to develop attitudes and beliefs about themselves that perpetuate fear of success. One such attitude is guilt. Women who have a fear of success orientation and feel guilty, subconsciously need to punish themselves for some past "mistake". They, therefore, fail to obtain a much desired goal. By doing so, women assuage their guilt by inflicting psychological pain. For example, a woman who feels guilty about leaving her child when she goes back to work may "punish" herself by failing to meet an important deadline, and therefore, not achieve her potential. As a result, she feels dutifully guilty over her "transgression" of leaving her child, but she is still not able to accept success.

Still another attitude that perpetuates the fear of success is viewing a career like a new game or toy instead of an important facet of her life. Many times this game is viewed as a "trial and error" approach. Women try it and if the game works, they continue; if not, they quit. For example, the woman may be almost totally consumed with the idea of getting ahead, however, she may still subconsciously consider the option of quitting or settling for something less than the desired goal. If the work

world becomes competitive and stressful, she simply withdraws from the game. These women do not view themselves as quitters. They tried the game and didn't like it. Women who equate a career with a game are afraid of actually achieving success because they fear it will impose difficult demands and a lack of commitment to any long-term goals. This lack of commitment is a myth that they live with, since it is argued that women work for "pin money", that they quit when they get married, that they follow their husbands around, and that they always put their families before their careers. These "half-truths" prove to be fatal to many womens' careers and contribute to the fear of success (Gupta, 1983).

Another psychological influence that greatly affects women are their beliefs. Beliefs that contribute to the fear of success include those displayed by the Type B versus the Type A personality. The Type A pattern, according to Freidman and Rosenman (1974), is defined as: "an action-emotion complex that can be observed in any person who is aggressively involved in a chronic, incessant struggle to achieve more and more in less and less time, and if required to do so, against the efforts of other things or persons they will succeed." The converse, Type B behavior pattern, is characterized by the relative absence of these traits and tends to be more relaxed. The Type B personality may pursue goals in a nonaggressive, noncompetitive manner and have no real strong sense of time urgency. Loewenstine and Paludi (1982) found that success-fearing women do indeed believe that affiliation and cooperation are more

important than competitive achievement. Type B women with a fear-of-success orientation may be concerned about alienating others as a result of succeeding. These women tend to worry and be less committed to their goals which causes them to settle for less. Type B women may have no strong sense of career expectation and therefore, exhibit fear of success behavior.

Another commonly held belief that women display is that any success is "just luck." Women with a fear-of-success orientation tend to believe that anyone could have done what they did and therefore are externally controlled (Gupta, 1983). An externally controlled woman feels that others, or fate, control her life. This woman cannot accept responsibility for achievement because she has a subconscious fear of success. When she achieves a goal, this woman has a tendency to downplay her own competence and to attribute her success to other factors. Any successes achieved were not due to her own capabilities, but rather to luck, serendipity, or being in the right place at the right time. This so-called luck makes a women feel inadequate because she cannot control her own destiny and therefore, has a lowered self-esteem. Or she may successfully accomplish a goal, but feel she cannot repeat or enhance her accomplishments. She feels that her accomplishment is too good to be true and that she couldn't possibly achieve at such a high level again. Therefore, women are not as willing to volunteer for challenging and "new" tasks as men are. This woman is afraid of continued success and what responsibilities it may entail, so she continues to lag behind her male counterpart (Gupta, 1983).

CULTURAL NORMS

The third factor which influences a woman's fear of success is attributed to cultural norms. Our society has only recently endorsed authoritative behavior in women at work. Early in life, women are taught that men have authority to manage the family's place in the external world, while women handle the internal world of the family and children (Chodorow, 1978). Women are encouraged to be nurturers, while men are encouraged to be achievers. Later in life, it is men who generalize the authority to work and it is women who are trained to take leadership under the support of, or in the shadow of, a man (Bayles and Newton, 1978). Consequently, women are threatened by individuation and therefore, achievement can only be viewed as concurrent with cultural norms when it occurs in the context of familial roles. Typically, women depend on personal relationships with men to obtain authority and in doing so, often exhibit an external appearance of helplessness, therefore, women's diminutive view of leadership is perpetuated by such an arrangement. Women are less likely to be skillful in handling their own authority in the work world because they lack training and socialization for the work world (Gupta, 1983). When women attempt to be authoritative or take charge, they are resisting the cultural norms which they were socialized in. Subsequently, conflicts often arise when a woman feels she is surpassing powerful authority figures such as males in her family. To avoid such a conflict, the woman exhibits behavior which typically characterizes the fear of success.

A cultural norm that can also contribute to the fear of success is the lack of mentoring among women. Mentor relationships can be an effective means for women to improve their career positions. Mentors can help mentees by helping them in the following ways: advise mentee on career goals, advancement, strategies, instruction in technical as well as social-managerial skills, visibility and exposure, counseling about work-related or personal problems, encouragement, confrontation, and actual opportunities to perform new skills that are acquired (Phillips-Jones, 1983). However, most women do not take advantage of a mentor/mentee relationship. Women for the most part don't seem to understand that these relationships are to enhance their career development and tend to be temporary in nature.

Many women will not take part in mentor relationships for fear of being associated with the wrong kind of person which could cause significant problems in their career development and hence destroy their independence. Women also fear that if men become their mentors that sexual interest might develop and hinder their career development (Berney, 1981).

Mentor relationships can be good if careful consideration to the people is given. It can actually provide the mentor with help in career development and clarify the expectations of the job. However, women tend to avoid mentor relationships and, therefore, continue to contribute to the fear of success.

Another cultural norm that can contribute to the fear of success is actually a deficit on our society. The fact is that

most women have no role model of a career woman who is highly successful in the work world. As mentioned, men have traditionally filled the leadership and authoritative roles. Consequently, a professional woman aiming for the top is a pioneer and has few role models. Women at the top have never before existed in meaningful numbers, so those who have succeeded professionally are very rare. Even though we may examine their lives as role models, these women are an anomaly which make their lives unique. There really are no guidelines for young professional women in our cultures. Role models have been shown to be extremely important to development (Block, 1978). If a female has no adequate role model for women-in-authority in the work world, she is much less likely to behave in a successful manner because she is going against what has been learned. Consequently, women who are ambitious and achievement-oriented must come to terms with their competitive, traditionally "unfeminine" behavior and accomplishments. Many career women have difficulty accepting achievement motivation in themselves and thus, behavior associated with the fear of success is likely to result.

SUMMARY

Many problems continue to plague women in their career development. Fear of success is a significant factor which contributes to women accomplishing less than their actual potential. The factors that were associated with fear of success are: familial, socialization, psychological influences and

cultural norms. Any one of these factors or a combination can precipitate behavior that undermines success and leads to failure in womens' career development.

If professionals would pay careful attention to the factors that lead to fear of success they may be able to assist women in pursuing their potential which will ultimately lead to achievement. Professionals must focus on strategies that will assist women in analyzing the alternatives and possibilities of the future. By understanding the complexity of the fear of success, professionals will be able to help individual women progress and therefore properly utilize abilities which are congruent with womens' career development.

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